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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4202
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5395
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN PRIORITY 0135
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA PRIORITY 0889
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1914
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0137
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 3088
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1150
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3696
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 0827
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 1069
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0414
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1993
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0605
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0130
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0754
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0426
RUEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001085

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HQSOUTHCOM FOR POLAD
DEPT PASS TP AID/OTI RPORTER
FRC FT LAUDERDALE FOR CLAMBERT
COPENHAGEN FOR DLAWTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/24/2016
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SUBJECT: STUDENTS "LAY DOWN FOR LIFE", POLITICS AS USUAL
FOR OPPOSITION AND CHAVISTAS

REF: CARACAS 01064

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Downes for reasons 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) On April 22, streets throughout Caracas were overtaken by three separate protests; the most organized of the three led by university students protesting deteriorating public security conditions in Venezuela and the other two by pro-government and opposition factions. Despite competing events, the student-led initiative garnered the support of thousands of concerned Venezuelans, including Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez. Lopez praised the efforts of student organizers but criticized opposition and pro-government political parties for holding parallel marches. Although there were no reported injuries, Chacao police were called to mediate a confrontation between pro-government and opposition supporters at Plaza Indio in Chacaito. Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon told local press sources that Venezuela's current security situation did not surface under Chavez' leadership but more than two decades earlier. Chacon added the government's "doors were open" to the public's suggestions for improving security conditions throughout the country. End Summary.

STREETS LINED WITH BODIES AND CHALK OUTLINES

¶12. (U) When the trumpet sounded at approximately 10:00 am on April 22, thousands of university students and their supporters lay down on the asphalt in Francisco Plaza and

allowed their silhouettes to be outlined in chalk on the pavement. A dramatic but peaceful gesture, participants of the April 22 student-led demonstration entitled "Laying Down For Life" hoped to draw the government's attention to deteriorating security conditions in Venezuela, which have resulted in the deaths of 67,000 Venezuelans in past years (ref A). Although the Venezuelan opposition blames current security conditions on Chavez' administration, Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon maintains the situation began more than two decades ago. Chacon announced April 22 the BRV is planning to host a public forum on April 27 to develop strategies for improving public safety. The government's "doors were open", Chacon added, to public suggestions. Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, who promised April 19 that 400 Chacao police would provide security for the student-organized event, participated in the demonstration and told reporters April 22 that students had achieved their goals and objectives despite parallel marches held by opposition and pro-government supporters. Local station Globovision provided comprehensive coverage of the event.

OPPOSITION SPLITS OVER SUPPORT FOR AN AND STUDENT MARCHES

¶3. (C) On April 19, student leaders gathered with opposition party leaders to sort out the competing events (ref A). Traditional opposition leaders were split between proceeding with their own march to the National Assembly (AN) and joining the student demonstration. Although initially denied permission to march to the National Assembly on April 22, the opposition finally received the government's approval on

CARACAS 00001085 002 OF 002

April 20. As a result, traditional opposition parties Copei, Accion Democratica (AD) and Bandera Roja announced April 21 that the march to protest electoral conditions would proceed as planned. Overall participation for the opposition's march was dismally low and in the end, several parties decided to support the students' initiatives instead of marching to the National Assembly. Many opposition supporters likened the outcome to poor planning on the group's behalf. Mayor Lopez criticized opposition and pro-government supporters for diverting participation from the student march.

CHAVISTA AGENDA: ANTI-IMPERIALISM, SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY

¶4. (U) Approximately 2000 pro-government demonstrators, including students from the University of Carabobo, National Experimental University of Francisco, and the Bolivarian University of Zulia as well as officials from the National Youth Institute, gathered 11:00 am on April 22 at Plaza Tres Gracias before proceeding to the Ministry of Interior and Justice (MIJ) where organizers presented Minister Chacon with a proposal for enhancing public security. Guided by the sounds of festive drums and music, the demonstration was reminiscent of a carnival celebration. Despite the festive atmosphere, however, organizers underscored the march was in defense of Venezuela's sovereignty, against imperialism, and for peace and improved public security measures. Student organizers had asked pro-government and opposition factions, in advance, to put aside their political differences for the day but supporters from both camps clashed at Plaza Indio in Chacaito. There were, however, no reported injuries.

¶5. (U) Most pro-government participants wore the traditional red shirts associated with the revolution and boasted of Chavez' 10 million vote victory objective for the upcoming presidential elections. There was also no shortage of propaganda broadcasted during commercial breaks on government-owned television station Venezuelan Television (VTV). VTV aired clips of Chavez' 2005 visit to Parana, Brazil where he denounced the "capitalist" model of

development, and his most recent calls for regional, economic integration.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) It is not likely that public demonstrations against deteriorating social and economic conditions in Venezuela will diminish in the near future, especially since the 2006 Presidential election is right around the corner. While declaring victory, the student turnout, though impressive and maybe reaching 20,000, was below the announced numerical objectives of demonstration organizers. At the same time, Venezuela's opposition and pro-government parties were both guilty of attempting to upstage the efforts of university students on April 22 to advance their political agendas; a move which probably served to benefit the government more than its citizens. The unfortunate reality is that as long as social problems continue to be examined along party lines, the BRV is not likely to take a serious, in-depth look at its shortcomings or to make long-term steps to improving them.

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